



Department of Justice

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
TUESDAY, AUGUST 11, 2009
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CRM
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TDD (202) 514-1888

LEADER OF COLOMBIAN DRUG CARTEL
AND FORMER FBI TOP-TEN FUGITIVE PLEADS GUILTY TO DRUG, MURDER
AND RACKETEERING CHARGES

WASHINGTON – Diego Montoya Sanchez, 48, one of the leaders of the Norte Valle Colombian drug cartel and a former FBI Top Ten Fugitive, pleaded guilty today in Miami to drug trafficking, murder and racketeering charges, the Justice Department announced.

The pleas were announced by Acting U. S. Attorney Jeffrey H. Sloman for the Southern District of Florida, Acting U.S. Attorney Lev L. Dassin for the Southern District of New York, Assistant Attorney General Lanny A. Breuer of the Criminal Division, FBI Executive Assistant Director Thomas J. Harrington and Acting Administrator Michele M. Leonhart of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

Montoya Sanchez appeared before U.S. District Judge Cecilia M. Altonaga in Miami, where he pleaded guilty in two pending federal cases. In the first case, which was indicted in the Southern District of Florida by the U.S. Attorney's Office, Montoya pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to import more than five kilograms of cocaine into the United States and one count of obstruction of justice by murder.

In the second case, which was indicted in the District of Columbia jointly by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York (SDNY) and the Criminal Division's Narcotic and Dangerous Drug Section (NDDS), Montoya Sanchez pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to engage in a pattern of racketeering activity. The SDNY/NDDS indictment was transferred to the Southern District of Florida for the guilty plea.

Following the decline of the Cali Cartel in the mid-1990s, the Norte Valle Cartel emerged to become Colombia's most prolific cocaine trafficking cartel. Based upon FBI estimates, at its peak the Norte Valle Cartel was responsible for 60 percent of the cocaine exported from Colombia to the United States. According to the SDNY/NDDS indictment, between 1990 and 2004, the Norte Valle Cartel exported more than 1.2 million pounds, or 500 metric tons, of cocaine worth more than \$10 billion from Colombia to the United States.

According to the statement of facts submitted in conjunction with today's hearing, Montoya Sanchez was a high-level Colombian drug trafficker for more than two decades. In the mid-1980s, Montoya Sanchez ran cocaine laboratories that served many significant traffickers.

In the late 1980s, Montoya Sanchez expanded his organization's operations into smuggling plane loads of cocaine from Colombia to Mexico. According to the statement of facts, by the early 1990s, Montoya Sanchez had switched to maritime smuggling. During the course of the next 15 years, Montoya Sanchez's organization routinely smuggled cocaine loads between 1,000 and 6,000 kilos at a time using go-fast boats and fishing boats, among other methods.

By the late 1990s, Montoya Sanchez and Wilber Varela emerged to become the Norte Valle Cartel's two leading kingpins. Mounting tensions between the Montoya and Varela organizations led to a two-year war between the organizations in which each targeted the other's members for murder. The Montoya-Varela war, which lasted from fall 2003 until fall 2005, resulted in hundreds of deaths, including those of innocent civilians.

At today's hearing, Montoya Sanchez admitted that his organization's practices included using violence and murder against people his organization feared were cooperating with law enforcement. Montoya Sanchez specifically admitted to the August 2003 murder of a one-time organization member who was believed to have been cooperating with authorities.

In May 2004, the FBI added Montoya Sanchez to its list of ten most wanted fugitives. On Sept. 10, 2007, Colombian authorities mounted an operation on a believed Montoya hide-out at a ranch in a rural area outside of Zarzal, Valle del Cauca, Colombia, and captured Montoya Sanchez hiding in a creek-bed approximately 700 yards from the ranch. Montoya Sanchez was extradited from Colombia to Miami on Dec. 12, 2008.

Jeffrey H. Sloman, Acting U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Florida, stated, "From the prosecution and conviction of the leaders of the Cali Cartel, to the conviction of Ze'ev Rosenstein and an Israel-based Ecstasy network, to today's dismantling of the Norte Valle Cartel, the Southern District of Florida has had a long and successful history in the war on drugs. We will continue to focus our energy, and the expertise of our prosecutors, to help our law enforcement partners stem the tide of drugs flooding our streets and poisoning our society."

"Diego Montoya Sanchez was the leader of a dangerous, violent drug organization," said Thomas J. Harrington, Executive Assistant Director of the FBI. "Outstanding cooperation between Colombia and the United States was key to his capture, the capture of others, and the effective dismantling of the Norte Valle Cartel. The FBI and its law enforcement partners, both here and overseas, will continue to work together to eliminate other international organized crime threats."

"The prosecution of Montoya Sanchez is a milestone in the efforts to dismantle the Norte Valle Cartel, one of the world's most powerful and dangerous drug-trafficking cartels," said Acting U.S. Attorney Lev L. Dassin for the Southern District of New York. "Montoya Sanchez's arrest and extradition marked the end of his long campaign of violence and corruption. We are grateful to our partners at the DEA and in the Colombian government for their tireless work in this investigation."

"Montoya Sanchez's path to the top of the Norte Valle Cartel was marked by decades of extreme violence. That path has now ended in a prison cell, where the man who personally

helped direct multi-ton shipments of addictive and destructive narcotics into American cities and towns will be held for his crimes,” said Assistant Attorney General Lanny A. Breuer of the Criminal Division. “This conviction is a major victory in the joint effort by Colombia and the United States to disrupt and dismantle these drug trafficking organizations, made possible through extensive cooperation with our partners in the Southern District of Florida, the Southern District of New York, the DEA and the FBI.”

“This notorious leader of the extremely violent Norte Valle Cartel is where he belongs: behind bars for murder, drug trafficking and racketeering,” said Acting DEA Administrator Michele M. Leonhart. “Due to the skilled and brave work by the men and women of DEA and the Colombian National Police, justice has been served for the many victims of his cartel’s extreme violence and the tons of cocaine that ended up on American streets. Now he is in prison, no longer able to use his power to destroy others or benefit from his ill-gotten gains.”

Montoya Sanchez is the fourth member of his family to be convicted as part of the case out of the Southern District of Florida. In January 2009, Montoya Sanchez’s brother, Eugenio Montoya Sanchez, pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to import more than five kilograms of cocaine into the United States and one count of obstruction of justice by murder and was subsequently sentenced to 30 years in prison. In November 2005, Montoya Sanchez’s brother, Juan Carlos Montoya Sanchez, and his cousin, Carlos Felipe Toro Sanchez, both pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to import more than five kilograms of cocaine into the United States. They were sentenced to terms of 262 and 235 months in prison, respectively.

According to in-court statements during the hearing, Diego Montoya Sanchez agreed to serve a 45-year prison term for the crimes outlined in the court documents. Sentencing has been scheduled for Oct. 21, 2009, at 8:30 a.m. before Judge Altonaga.

The Southern District of Florida indictment is being prosecuted by the U.S. Attorney’s Office and was investigated by the FBI. The SDNY/NDDS indictment was the result of a multi-district investigation and is being prosecuted jointly by SDNY and NDDS, and was investigated by the DEA. The Criminal Division’s Office of International Affairs and NDDS Judicial Attachés in Bogota, Colombia provided significant assistance in both cases. U.S. law enforcement received invaluable assistance in its prosecution of Diego Montoya Sanchez from the Government of Colombia, the Colombian National Police and the Colombian Army.

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